

Robert C. Lafoon

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Interviewed by Edward Sanderson

Transcribed by Unknown

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*****Interview starts at 2:31*****

Sanderson: Today is September 23rd, 2015. I'm Edward Sanderson, oral history intern at the Pritzker Military Museum & Library in Chicago, Illinois, and we have the esteemed pleasure of talking with the retired Robert C. Lafoon of the US Army. You were in the Department of Army Special Photographic Office, DASPO, from 1966 to 1967... or '69?

Lafoon: No. I joined the unit in October of '1965, and then I left the unit in March of 1968.

Sanderson: '68. Okay, off by a couple years. And specifically, we're talking to him in regards to the new exhibit we have: "Faces of War." Thank you for coming out, and thank you for sitting down and talking to us.

Lafoon: No problem.

Sanderson: One of the questions to start off with... did you join the Army or were you drafted into the Army?

Lafoon: No, I joined the Army.

Sanderson: Now, what year was that?

Lafoon: That was February of 1964.

Sanderson: And prior to joining DASPO in '65; what did you do in the Army before then?

Lafoon: Well, when I first joined the Army, I ended up going to the 2nd Armored Division in Fort Hood, Texas, and I was in a mechanized infantry unit. After being in there for just about a year, I elected to basically extend a year on my contract, and reclassify and go to a still photography school in Fort Monmouth [New Jersey].

Sanderson: And did you have any interest in photography before you changed MOS's [Military Occupational Specialty] or was that something that you developed while you were in?

Lafoon: No, my mother and grandfather were avid photographers, and my mother had a camera that I ended up with, and I started just shooting, got interested in that way. In high school, I joined a camera club, and learned pretty much the basics of how to operate a camera. You know, speed, F-stop, exposures, and the minor things that you first learn.

Sanderson: When did you find out that you could become an Army photographer?

Lafoon: Well, pretty much, when I reenlisted you had the option of going... if you extended that one year; you could go to certain schools. So I elected to go the Fort Monmouth one... and kind of, sort of like a contract with the Army, "Hey, you go in another year, and we'll let you go to a school of your choice. If it's available." And still photography was available, so I took it.

Sanderson: How did you get into... well, kind of looking at when you were at Fort Monmouth, in New Jersey, what was some of the training that you received while you were there?

Lafoon: It was all different phases of still photography. Everything from what we call the "grip and grins," to... we also would go out to Lakehurst Naval Air Station [Lakehurst Maxfield Field], and we would do aerial photography. All the basic... using lights and flash. You know, pretty much everything you would need to go out and join a combat camera unit.

Sanderson: And specifically with your MOS, you're an 84 Bravo versus the Charlie and the Gulf.

Lafoon: Correct, 84 Bravo was a still photographer.

Sanderson: And the 84 Charlie was a cinematographer, and the 84 Gulf... that was a different type of photographer, or...?

Lafoon: To tell you the truth, I don't remember the 84 Gulf. Our unit, we had Bravos and Charlies, we were still guys and MoPic [motion picture].

Sanderson: Now, when you graduated from the school in Fort Monmouth, did they try to send you to the 221st, or did they send you directly to DASPO?

Lafoon: No. Right before you graduate, they give you the old "wish list," and the funny part about it was, I said, "Hey, you know..." Believe it or not, Hawaii was basically a foreign tour back then, so I said, "Well, I'll put Hawaii down first, Germany second, and then Korea, and then home side, Fort Meade or whatever." And I got orders, and I was totally shocked that I got orders for Hawaii. That's how I ended up going to DASPO. That was... I graduated from school in September, and then in October 1st, 1965, is when I walked in the door at DASPO.

Sanderson: And what was it like... especially, 'cause at this point, DASPO had only been around for a couple years 'cause it was formed in '62, and you got there in '65. So it was still... still a new concept in the terms of military organizations. Do you feel that there was—was there any type of learning process going on?

Lafoon: Oh yeah. Yeah, you're a rookie. In fact, when I joined that unit, I became the youngest member of the unit. So I was your proverbial nineteen year old in the unit. Yeah, you had... other photographers had been doing this for years. You had to work your way up to their standards, and with their help, it worked out good.

Sanderson: Some of the other gentlemen that we've been speaking to, beforehand they would give them small assignments just to get them used to doing almost more specialized training, before they sent them out to the field. Did they send you on any type of specialized assignments, there, in Hawaii before they sent you there?

Lafoon: Well they did. We... there would be... Gee, I don't even remember the type of small shoots you'd go out on. They might be grip-and-grin type thing, or maybe somebody coming back from Vietnam, or a special story. I did that from October 1st, until my first deployment, which was January of 1966. So yeah, we did... and we would do a little bit of training, and, you know, look at our own stuff. We had a lab across from us, our own lab. They would develop the film, and we could get a look at it and correct mistakes and those kind of things. But the combat side came in January of 1966.

Sanderson: And in '66 did they send... was your first time going directly to Vietnam?

Lafoon: Yes.

Sanderson: What was it like when you... Well, what kind of assignments did you have?

Lafoon: My very first one, they sent me on a combat operation. I went out on Operation Crimp, in January '66. The motion man that with me was Frank Salas, and we shot Operation Crimp. And then following that, 'course went back to Saigon, typed up our captions, did our story, which might take two or three days. And the operation name had changed. Operation Crimp was with the 1st Infantry Division, and shortly after it changed to Operation Buckskin, and we went right out on Operation Buckskin, and you would do the same thing. We would do our shoot, come back, type our captions, and go back out again.

Sanderson: What did you think of the villa?

Lafoon: It was kind of a... it was neat. I mean, the thing about going out to the field, is when we're out in the field, is that when we're out in the field we're... got a poncho, we're like anybody else. You're sleeping in the bush and everything else. So coming back to the villa was great, especially when you knew how the rest of the soldiers had to continue on. We would at least get a nice break between photo shoots by going back to the villa, cleanin' up, getting' sanitary again or whatever, before we went out on another shoot.

Sanderson: During that time, how many times did you go into what they quote-on-quote called "the bush," or, out into the field?

Lafoon: Probably... I mean, the first time I went over was, again, January of '66, and I was there until April of '66, and that one alone was probably... at least seven or eight operations, I would think. You may not get that many on each of your tour, but if you had to say—if I had to take a wild guess, over twenty during my one year within Vietnam. But again, they would be short time-frames in the field. It's not like you're going out there for a

month. You might go out for five days, ten days, come back, then go back out again. Then if you got lucky you might get another photo shoot of what wasn't a combat operation in the meantime. Unfortunately, this would be like a one day or two day shoot, and quick, you know?

Sanderson: Was there any specific photo shoots that you remember? When you were out there... in the operations in the field, were there any specific photos that you remember from your first one? From your first time on Operation Crimp and Buckskin?

Lafoon: Crimp was pretty much... photo-wise it was kind of like the standard stuff. I mean, there's incidents that happen. Again, I was with 1st Infantry and they had called in some close air support with some Vietnamese pilots, and when they said close air support, it was close. So we did some duckin' there. Of course, it was my first introductory to combat, and you found out what "spider holes" were, and tunnel entrances, and what it was like to be under fire for the first time. My second... no, third operations, I went out on Van Buren, that was with the 101st Airborne. They flew in a Catholic chaplain, Bruno Masotti, otherwise known was—in fact, he was from Alabama... he was called "The Bear from Alabama." He did a Catholic mass, which was... we just happened to be there when he flew in, and that was kind of memorable, doing a Catholic mass in the field.

Sanderson: Now on... there's one of the pictures that... it's not directly in the exhibit, but it's going to be part of the online, as well as it's going to be displayed here in the museum. Is that that picture with the...

Lafoon: Yes, yes that's Chaplain Bruno Masotti, and it's... we were with the 101st Airborne at the time, and that was Operation Van Buren... And I'm still in touch with his wife today.

Sanderson: Looking back in the records, you won an award for that picture.

Lafoon: Yes, I did.

Sanderson: What kind of award was it?

Lafoon: It's a communications electronics award. I think in a roundabout way it comes out of Fort Monmouth, because that's kind of like the signal schools, photography, you know, elite stuff, and they're the ones that issue the award.

Sanderson: Looking back, what were some of the types of transportation that you used while you were there in Vietnam?

Lafoon: You mean for the photo shoots, or at all times?

Sanderson: At all times.

Lafoon: At all times. You had the cyclo which was like a bicycle. You had motorized cyclo, you had bicycles, and we did have two vehicles. We had a Jeep, I think it was a 151 if I'm not

mistaken, and we kind of used that. There was a PX [Post Exchange] facility in Chợ Lớn, which is part of Saigon, and we would constantly go back and forth to Chợ Lớn using the Jeep. Later on we had a driver and a... kind of like a van, almost. That also.

Sanderson: To get out into the various areas that you went. Would you generally take jeeps to get out there, or would you jump on the helicopter or a plane, or whatever you could get?

Lafoon: Well, a lot of the areas you could actually go out from Saigon and get out to them. Củ Chi I believe, was one. And again this was 66-67. I think you could drive, pretty much from Saigon to Củ Chi, which was the 25th Infantry. You could drive to Lai Khê, Di An, and Bien Hoa, which were basically, I believe, all the 1st Infantry Division. You could drive to them. There might've been some other ones, but then if you went pretty much anywhere north, or way south, you would use a helicopter or small prop planes, like a C-130, or a 121, or a Caribou [de Havilland Canada DHC-4 Caribou], we used Caribous also, so you would jump on those. We have a flight pass, a 1A pass, to where we could just "shoo," go get on the plane.

Sanderson: Nice. During that time, when you'd be in the helicopters, or in the... specifically the helicopters, I know, talking to a lot of the other guys, pretty much they... that was one of their primary modes of transportation, but also, they would take a lot of photographs while they were in the helicopters.

Lafoon: Oh, yeah.

Sanderson: Did you do that as well?

Lafoon: Oh, yeah, yeah. We might go on a job where they would turn around, and they may want some aerials of one area or another. One specific one that I remember was... they had microwave towers, I believe—is what I was shooting. There was one up in Monkey Mountain, in Da Nang, and there was one in Pleiku. So we would go out, and our job was to take aerial photos of the microwave towers, and then also while we were out there, if we can get a distant shot of say the installations itself, we might do that, like 1st Cav [Cavalry] up at An Khê, Pleiku, and a couple other ones. We took—I took aerials. The other guys... I mean we were more members...there was more members, and some of the other members may be shooting, say, the southern region. You know, Cần Thơ and those areas. You know, shoot the installations from the air.

Sanderson: Now, looking at it for this exhibit, you have a quite a few pictures in there. Some of them are very... the pictures are beyond awesome. Could you read some of the captions and talk about the actual photograph, in itself?

Lafoon: Sure, sure. Do you want me to use this?

Sanderson: Yes, if you wouldn't mind. And then, that way, what we do is, as we're going through, they can use this for the audio tour. And then we can jump back into the last couple of questions.

Lafoon: Do you want me to point this to you or anything?

Sanderson: No.

Lafoon: Well, the top one is a soldier—we had been out—this is Operation Cedar Falls, with the 5th Mechanized Infantry, and the 25th Infantry Division. Again, it was Operation Cedar Falls, and we had a pretty bad day. Even through you're out there with armored personal carriers, most of the time you're dismounted and you're walking, the APCs [armored personnel carrier] usually stay in the back. And you're walking through, and it was really hot. We'd had, like I said, a pretty bad day. We'd taken some casualties. And myself, I got up in the inside, to take a break outside the armored personal carrier. And I sat in the track commander's seat, and while I was there, exhausted, another soldier came in and sat in front of me and to my right. And the 113s have what they call a "combat hatch," that opens up, and when I was sitting there, looking at him, the light came right down through on his face, from that combat hatch. And I said... and he was exhausted. In fact, I'm pretty sure he was asleep. There was sweat and dirt just trickling down the side of his face, so I just very quietly got a shot of him. That's probably one of my favorites. There's another one, it's an 81mm mortar crew. I'm not sure... I think that's Operation Cook, we were on a mountaintop. It is the 101st Airborne, and they were doing a fire mission. Although we were on a mountaintop, the infantry guys were down in the valleys, and they were kind of, pretty close to the mountain. And they had called in a fire mission and, of course, if you look at the photograph, you can see that that tube's sticking pretty high, which means we were firing pretty close. There's another picture out there that's... and, well, I can't remember the fellow's name. I wish I had my captions. He's a sergeant, first class, and he's holding a little Vietnamese girl and the two of them are smiling. The reason I took shot was, we were out there on what they call a "pacification program," where you go in and you help them with medicine and food and those kinds of things. And helicopters were coming in with food and stuff on it, and he just happened to be holding that little girl, and she looked at the helicopter coming in, and he did, and the smiles on the two of them face just, "Pshw." Had to have that shot. So I kind of like that one. There's another shot out there where there's two medics that are loading a casualty... that is the 69th Armored, with the 25th Infantry Division, and I think it was Operation Lincoln; without the captions, it's hard to tell. But he had received a leg wound that was pretty bad, and they were medevacking [medical evacuation] him out. And it was just the way they were loading him, and putting him there and everything, it just looked photographic to me, so snap away. Another photograph in there of my fellow photographer, Dan Bauer, he's an 84-C, MoPic guy. We were with the 199th Infantry, and it was Operation Rang Dong. He had just gotten in there... like I said, we worked in teams... He got initiated real quick to irrigation canals,

leeches, and that such. And, of course, he's up to his waist in water. That was my very last combat operation. So when I got done with that one, typed my captions, and home I went. Another one is General Westmoreland. I don't know why everybody was crazy about that shot, but it's all over the place for some reason. The Thais... the Thailand... the Queen's—Queen's Cobra Battalion, or Brigade, had come over from Thailand to join the fight. That was at the port of Saigon, and General Westmoreland was there to meet them and greet them when they got off the boats. Just happened to snap that particular shot of him, along with a whole bunch of other ones, but that's the one they seemed to take, for some reason. Another shot I have with is Operation Cook. It was the 101st Airborne and the 502nd 'cause with the... I'm in touch with the 502nd guys all the time... with their websites and stuff. I don't have this fella's name, but he was known for his mohawk haircut, and that's why I took the shot. He's sitting there, eating some turkey, and some peas. We had been out and humped all day long, and I mean humped, it was mountains. Fortunately, they flew in hot chow, they used the containers and they brought them in hot chow. So we had stopped to eat chow, and it was just... in that unit itself he was known for his mohawk haircut, so I said, "Hey, I got to get a shot of this guy." Same operation... is a camp, it's Mendoza. And that was the same operation. We had got hit a little bit, he was returning fire with an M-16. That shot's known... got picked up. I got to be honest, I never noticed it. I was just taking a picture of him, but on his helmet... there's all kinds folks out there that love helmet graffiti. And on his helmet, and I can't read it right now, but it's basically "Home to California," he was... or something to that notion. That's why everybody when crazy for that shot, because of the helmet graffiti. Then there's another shot out there, that's Specialist Milton Cook, unfortunately he's past. That was Operation Cedar Falls. That one relates back to the same day of the other soldier that was in the back of the track, with the combat hatch. We had been sniped at really bad, and what they had told him to do was... there was a tree line we were taking sniper fire, they just loaded up on that tree line. That one, you got to look hard, you'll see a little shell being extracted. It's back by his right hand, and then the smoke on the barrel. When you see the smoke on the barrel, you'll know. See, another one out there, it's a 105. Same thing, we were on a mountaintop, I believe that was Operation Cook also. 101st Airborne, always got to put them guys in there. That was 1967, Operation Cook, and it was artillery guys, we were on a mountaintop and they were firing support for the ground troops. Another picture out there, which I kind of like, is a shot from the back. We had just landed... on a helicopter assault. There was a lot of smoke in front... they threw out some smoke. And it's the 101st Airborne, and it's a shot of the... I shot them from the back, and you can see where there's a couple of radio telephone operators, RTOs, surrounding the company commander. Some smoke in the front, and it just... one of those things. It's like, "Man, it looks good!" So I shot it. The next shot... there's another shot out there. That's Jackie Colter, fellow Georgian; unfortunately, he passed from... I've talked to his wife, and I've also talked to his grandson, made sure that they got that shot, holding that little dog. That was Operation Buckskin, with the 1st Infantry, and that was 1966, that was my second combat

operation, so I'm digressing a little bit. He was sittin' on the top of an M113 Armored Personnel Carrier, and you can see the 50 caliber sticking out.

Sanderson: That's a nice picture.

Lafoon: Thank you.

Sanderson: It's kind of cool, him holding the dog. You see that when I was in Iraq, and you see it in Afghanistan. Sometimes you just... you get...people get pets.

Lafoon: Oh yeah, you go pet crazy out there, you really do. The story with the little dog was—we had had a little bit of a firefight, and they brought in close air support. In fact, I think it was... I don't think that was a particular one or not. But the area in front of us was hit like crazy and here comes this little dog. I don't know how the dog even survived, and Colter picked the dog up. Another one out there is a fellow Georgian. That's Ronald Payne, he was a tunnel rat. And if anybody wants to out on the internet and look up "Ronald Payne" plus "Vietnam," you will find out that he stayed in the tunnels. That particular shot, we were about to go into—that was Operation Cedar Falls, and it was the famous Củ Chi tunnels, and he was about to go down into tunnel, to check it out. That particular tunnel ended up having a, kind of a minor... a little hospital in there and some other stuff. Ronald Payne was quite a character. I managed to contact him, probably about two years. I finally got a hold of him. They had asked him one time, "Why did you... what was the thing about tunnels?" And he said, "It is was one of the cooler places in Vietnam, you know, temperature wise." So that was the only thrill out of it. That was pretty much it with Ronald Payne. But again, that was Operation Cedar Falls, and the tunnels are Củ Chi. I think that's about it on here. Oh, no, I take it back. There's a couple other ones. I better mention this one 'cause that's Ted's [Ted Acheson, DASPO] favorite.

Sanderson: There were a couple of...

Lafoon: Yeah. Yeah, this one here. That one's been out through a little bit. That's 1967... God, what was the name of the operation? We were in the An Lao Valley, and that was with 1st Cavalry Division... it's a picture of... we're returning, we're back in a valley in a flatland. They've captured three people, three VC [Viet Cong], one female. It's a picture of walking back into our—I believe out battalion command post—to evacuate them back. Those captives were captured in the side of a mountain. There's more photographs from the shoot, needless to say. They were hiding in caves on the side the mountains in An Lao Valley. They had... the 1st Cav had gone in there and flushed them out; they were getting sniper fire and all kinds of fire from the sides of the mountains. They ended up throwing tear gas in there and talking them out. Then they took them back. And, I think that's it. Oh no, sorry. [Laughter] Another one is... Specialist Fred Greenleaf. I'm sorry, but, unfortunately, he's past away too. He's up to his waist in water. Behind him is Dan Bauer, our cameraman. We're in... and there's a female in

there and everybody asks, "Well, what was she doing in that photograph?" We had... this was, again, Operation Rang Dong. We had done, earlier, a helicopter assault in some rice fields, and that was another real bummer in itself, stuck in all kinds of good stuff. She happened to be out there working in the rice field when we landed—when we made the assault. So we made her stay with us, and she did get repatriated with her village, later on. And, let me see... Oh boy, there's some pictures here my guys shot.

Sanderson: Some of these photographs have been... I was lookin' at a lot of the photographs on the exhibit, it's just like wow. I mean, some of the stuff that you guys captured, when you look at it, it boggles the mind; especially the one where you have... where the guy's just exhausted, and taking a couple minutes just to get a couple minutes of shuteye just to kind of relax. Then, of course, the sergeant with the kid, just how both of them are just grinning, having that good grin.

Lafoon: A lot it's being in the right place in the right time.

Sanderson: And the eyes for photography that... the eyes for photography that DASPO, and specifically yourself have, I think a lot of people, I myself... I'm the kind of person, I just walk around doing this—I just close the shutter and...

Lafoon: Click away.

Sanderson: Right. And go back through... thank God for digital 'cause I can go back and be like, "Okay, I can delete that, delete that, delete that..."

Lafoon: Oh, I wish we had digital then. Oh boy, I wish we... 'cause a lot of shots were made that... the other thing about shooting out there was the elements. I mean, there was a lot of cameras that would... or lost. We used 120 rolleiflex and you literally cranked it to the next shot, and you had to be very careful not to get dirt in that crank mechanism or it jammed. It's a lot of fighting with the elements.

Sanderson: Now, looking back at... with the photographs and seeing how we have the exhibit going. Why do you feel that it's important to continue the legacy of DASPO?

Lafoon: Well, when you're... well, the legacy of DASPO has really been turned into Combat Camera, I think is what it's called now, and it's multiservice. It's out of Fort Mead, Maryland, I believe. You got Air Force cameramen, and depending on what the job is, they go out in shoot. I got all the respect in the world for the media, don't get me wrong, but even there, you're there. You know, you talk about now, about, "Well, you know, embedded camera-people." Well, they're usually using the term "embedded," you're thinking, "Well, the media." NBC, ABC, and the rest of them. We were embedded. We were embedded way back when, and when we went out with the units, we would stay with them. You get a truer picture that way. If you go in and come out, and go in and come out... you may not be there to get a picture of that sergeant smiling with that

little girl. You might've come in for one reason and left. But the legacy is going to be that history, that's it. If you look at photographic history of Vietnam now, that's what we're leaving behind. There's your photographic history of Vietnam. I really don't know what else to say about it, you know.

Sanderson: And I'm looking it 'cause later on... 'cause you left DASPO in '68?

Lafoon: Correct.

Sanderson: And you got out of the Army at the timeframe?

Lafoon: Yes, I left.

Sanderson: And then you had a break in service until 1989, correct?

Lafoon: 1985.

Sanderson: Eighty-five, when you rejoined the Army, but you joined in the Reserves.

Lafoon: Right.

Sanderson: Now looking back at the time when you joined in '85 to when you retired in 2002, and looking at the time... 'cause you worked... what was your MOS when you rejoined?

Lafoon: Well, I was a... at first I went in, I was a military intelligence analyst, but I never went to get the MOS training, I did a lot of OJT [on-the-job training]. I had, while I was in the Reserves, also gained a supply-type MOS. And the other thing was, the unit I was in was Forces Command, United States Army Forces Command at Fort McPherson [in Atlanta, Georgia]. So I was kind of a jack of all trades. I worked in the G2, which was the MI [military intelligence] section, and I worked in G4, which was logistics, and I worked in G3, which was operations. The operations side of the house, they used me because in earlier civilian things, I was doing in the MI were all I learned how to use the digital cameras that finally came out, the computers, how to use modems, and transfer—and do those kind of things. So I did all three of those aspects while in the Reserves. While I was at Fort McPherson [Georgia] a job came along in operations, and it was a civil service job. And the timing was perfect. So I went with them as a Department of Army Civil [Civilian] Service... started out as a GS11. They had put me on... this did come back in a little bit, I forgot about that. I was on a deployment team. And what we did was... we were called the eyes and ears of the Forcecom [Force Readiness Command] commander, and we may go down to Beaumont, Texas, if the Army was doing what they call a "sea exercise," deploying this or... something went on over here, we would take out digital cameras and out laptop computers and we would go out there and do on the spot stuff—photography or whatever—and send it Forces Command. I did that for a short time 'cause I'm getting a little bit old, and a little bit much. A job came open in logistics, and it was managing certain kinds of equipment, Army wide in the

continental US. So I took that and got transferred from my deployment thing. I got kind of tired of doing the TDY routine. And went in the logistical side, and guess what I was managing? Lot of it was the camera stuff. All the camera equipment, audio/visual equipment, in the Army. Kept track of it, who's got what, who's supposed to get what. And then they tacked on night-vision equipment - talk about a headache. And of course, 2001 comes along, and talk about a real headache, trying to manage all that stuff. So that's pretty much it. I did get activated in 1990... August of 1990 I did get activated for about nine months, and got deactivated in June of '91. I did go to Desert Storm for two months, I think was... I can't remember the time-frame. I didn't go there, originally, I went over later, in March, I think it was, of '91, for a couple months, then came back. And I ended up retiring from civil service.

Sanderson: And looking back at being there for Vietnam, and how it was in the sixties, during a... the majority of people were actually being drafted, to being part of a volunteer army during the Reserves and during the second... during another war. What was it like being on two sides of the coin, so to speak?

Lafoon: Well, when you went in... when I went back in '64, you were kind of... you had all kinds of references. If somebody was going to go in the Army and stay in, they were called a "lifer." Some of my best friends were draftees. When I go back, if I ever had to say anything about draftees, they were great. Here was folks that... I joined, I knew what I was getting into. In today's Army and today's service, you're joining. Especially with all the news, you know what you're getting into. But you elect to join. I think where the draftees got cut short, especially in Vietnam, is the fact that they were called to duty, and to all those draftees, it's like, "You did great. You got called to duty, you did your job". A lot of went you went to Vietnam and a whole bunch of them lost their lives and a whole bunch of them are wounded—to this day. I like the concept of an all-volunteer Army, but at the same point and time, I think there's a lot of kids out there that are missing the boat because they don't go in as a draftee or whatever for two years and see what the rest of the world is like. I think we missed the boat a little bit. So if you're asking, "Gee, would I support a draft?" And the answer would be: "Yes, but you don't have to draft... you can use them for fillers, if you follow what I'm saying. I've got an all-volunteer Army, I've got X quantity of troops. Oops, I'm a little short of folks." Well, I don't know how you would do it. But I think the draft served some good purposes during its time.

Sanderson: Definitely. Kind of looking back at your time with DASPO, kind of jumping back into that...Were there any type of challenges that you were able to overcome, being, the fact that when you joined, you were with the Armored Division, then become a photographer. Was there any type of... any challenges that you overcame going through camera school, but also when you got out there, and here you were, trained as a regular soldier, so to speak? Instead of being used to having that rifle, and looking at a conflict, or having that mindset of, "Okay, bullets start going down the range, you need to pick

up a rifle and send bullets back down range towards the people that are shooting.”
Now, here you have a camera, doing the same thing. And you're taking pictures of that, instead of sending out... did you have any challenges with that or any problems with it?

Lafoon: No. The one advantage of having my one year in mechanized infantry, even though you're mechanized infantry, you're still infantry. You do the same training and whatever, you just happen to ride in the back of a 113. But I think that was very helpful when I went into the unit because I was already in pretty good shape. Qualified with a variety of weapons, M60, not a 16, an M14, but, of course 45, and even an 81 mm mortar. So I think I probably had more of an advantage with that one year at the 2nd Armored Division then, say, some of those that were coming straight out of photo school that never had of that type of combat arms training. So I think that actually helped me, especially when you went out and you started humping so many miles a day. Luckily, I didn't have a problem keeping up. When it came down to... I think most photographer guys will tell you, especially when I'm talking Army combat photographer guys. It's like, "You know, if something was to happen bad enough to where I've got to put my camera down, unfortunately, there will probably be a whole lot of weapons available if I need it." I think the only time I pulled out my .45 was to shoot a tree, just to see if it was still working. But no... The hardest problem I had was, again, I went into the Army after high school, my hardest problem actually, was I was not a very good writer. I was terrible at writing. 'Course we all know Rupy, you've met Sergeant Ruplenas, you know, he was old when I got there, and that was 1965. Got a lot of mentorship out of guys like him that were old timers that were helping me better my writing skills, and my photography skills, also. We would... after we would do a photoshoot, at first, we would send all that stuff up to the Pentagon, and the only thing that we would see after that would be a sheet of contact prints, of the negatives. And then they would meticulously... the old timers would meticulously look at them all and say, "You missed the boat on this one because," or, "You missed the boat on this because." You know, "Your depth of field was wrong on this," or, "Your exposure was wrong on this." 'Course it's hard to do that 'cause we shot color, and we'd get black and white slop... we called slop prints.... slop prints back. But yeah, it's being the younger guys and everything else, but, luckily, we had some really good old-timers and new guys.

Sanderson: And that kind of brings it into the next question. Looking at all the different individuals that you worked with during the timeframe, who was... if you could pinpoint one person or multiple people, who was your mentor or mentors in DASPO?

Lafoon: Probably, on the still photography side, and again the writing, probably Rupy, Sergeant Ruplenas. And on the going to the field side, and learning how to go out that way, was actually two motion guys, who also... motion guys shot still if it needed to happen. Didn't quite work that way with us. You know, me pick up a motion picture camera. But... who it would be... Dick Welsh [i.e. Richard D. Welsh], and Marty Steinbis. Those two guys had been in the unit very early on. Dick Welsh went on to be... he ran the... as

as a civil service later on, ran the Navy camera labs and did production work and everything else. But him and Marty Steinbis probably were the two that showed me the ropes in the field and those kind of things. Helped me out.

Sanderson: Since you retired in 2002...

Lafoon: From the Reserves, correct.

Sanderson: From the Reserves. During that timeframe, since they started the reunions fifteen years ago, how many of the reunions have you been to?

Lafoon: They had a couple before I ever went. I think the first one I went to was 1996 in [Washington], DC. I don't get to them all. I couldn't back then because of my civil service job, and with the civil service... and even though it was in the Reserves, the civil service side was, after 2001, was creating more havoc logistically that way. But I've been to probably about five or six of them. I try to get to every other one, if possible. It depends on where they are, too.

Sanderson: Right, yeah. I was going to say, it could be a haul for... depending on the person. Why do you think that it's important to keep doing the reunions?

Lafoon: I don't.... to me it is important, because it seems like every year we pick up somebody that hadn't been there before or whatever, and it brings more to the plate, especially now. I'm one of the earlier guys in the reunions, in the unit. We started in '62, and I think it was, and I came along in '65, but the unit itself... I think the last shoot might've been... even though we weren't in at the time. I mean, '72, I think, is when all the troops finally came out, but our guys were still going over on shorter trips all the way to '74. So when you turn around and you say, "Well, now were picking up more and more guys from that timeframe, and there's more and more history that comes into it. Oh, well, so and so just came, he was there in '73!" And you're picking up that history, and everything else. DASPO really will probably continue, but like I said, it's going to be out of Fort Mead with Combat Camera folks, and that's where it eventually ended up anyway 'cause, I think the unit, when it got disbanded, and I think it was totally disbanded, I think in Fort Gillem [Georgian; closed in 2011] or Fort Bragg, in North Carolina, I'm not sure which, and it was kind of, sort of turned over to the Combat Camera guys at Fort Meade, Maryland.

Sanderson: When it was disbanded '74, everything... all the resources and everything were moved to Bragg. Eventually it wound up in Fort Meade 'cause it was in Bragg for a little while, and then moved up to Fort Meade, and now Combat Camera.

Lafoon: And the Combat Camera is joint service now, from what I understand. That's one trip I wish I would have made, 'cause we did a reunion and I didn't make that one, and they went up and they visited with that unit, quite interesting.

Sanderson: Now it's a joint service, Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, all the combat cameramen, all the photojournalists, anything like that, they all go to the same school now.

Lafoon: Correct.

Sanderson: There's a... the majority of the schools are all multiservice. The medical... the medical enlisted training command is down in Fort Sam [Houston in San Antonio, Texas] now. We all go to the same school. And it actually... I mean, might as well, the Brits have been doing it forever, best way to save money.

Lafoon: Sure. It makes sense. You don't need four installations in four different services doing four different things. It's all basic stuff.

Sanderson: Couple of more questions, couple of questions to end it. One of the things that we've been asking a lot is what does it feel like to have been a member of DASPO?

Lafoon: Well, I'm almost seventy years old, and it was probably one of the, with the exception of my family, was probably the highlights of my life, was being a member of DASPO. Great... you turn around and you think, "Enlisted guys and that." It's one of the most professional units that I've ever been associated with. They did a fantastic job from day one throughout the Vietnam era. It's something that I'll never forget. And the camaraderie between photographers, and the good times that we've had, and the bad. You know, we lost a couple guys, and we had a lot of wounded. But its stuff that you... it's one of the highlight things of my life. It gave me a chance to leave something behind, history-wise. We all have egos, and it's like, "Wow, when I'm dead, when I'm gone, it's like, I've left a little something behind." Makes you feel good. And being a member of the unit was, again, one of the highlights of my life.

Sanderson: Outstanding. And one of the other things is, when someone comes to the exhibit that we're doing here at the museum and library, what is it that you would like them to take away from it, when they look at your photographs, or any of the photographs?

Lafoon: I would like everyone to understand, and I don't want to get too mushy on this one, what Vietnam vets went through, coming home. And I hope that those photographs that are up there that will show everything from when you have soldiers carrying Vietnamese children out of harm's way, when you see the soft sides with the dogs and the puppies and the help and everything else that the American public, let alone the world, will treat a Vietnam veteran, and think about a Vietnam veteran just like they would if they were thinking about a Korean War veteran, a World War II veteran, a World War I veteran, Desert Storm veteran. With all we're going through today, Vietnam veterans were no different than any other veterans, and I hope they take that away when they see. It's like, we're no different. Okay?

Sanderson: Outstanding. And finally, at this point in the interview, is there anything that you would like to add that we didn't cover on the photographs or anything along those lines?

Lafoon: No, I think you covered it very well. Probably took too much of your time.

Sanderson: Oh, no, no. Actually, surprisingly, we're actually five minutes ahead of schedule.

Lafoon: All right, okay.

Sanderson: But thank you very much for sitting down and talking with us on this. It's been a pleasure and an honor to meet you, and to talk with you. And one of the things that we would like to do a full interview to get, starting from the day you were born, all the way up to now. A lot of it for the oral history program, so that we can continue your story 'cause you have a very unique story where here you were in Vietnam, joined before really the war really started up. To... you got out, you were a civilian for a while, then you became a reservist, then you were part of another conflict. It was a little more popular, but at the same time...

Lafoon: There was... that's one thing I would like to add. I came home from Vietnam. I got out, like I said, in March of 1968, and I know what I came home to. Another thrill of my life is when I came home from Desert Storm. When I came home from... and I was in Dhahran [Saudi Arabia]. And when I came back from Dhahran, we were met at the airport, we were greeted, we were cheered, we all had brand new uniforms, brand new desert boots and everything else. And that was another thrill, is being greeted the way we were greeted when we came back from Desert Storm. And you put that in the contrast of how we came back... a lot of us came back from Vietnam, and I got out through Oakland terminal out in California, and there's no way in the world you would wear your army uniform when you walked out that gate. So there's a big... and again, that's what I would love for people to understand and see with all of these photographs. A Vietnam veteran is an American veteran. Okay? One thing... sorry, here I go with my motor mouth... one thing I really would like to do is thank Pritzker and all of y'all doing what you've done to put this on, and to try to show at least some of the United States, world, hopefully, that come in here and looked at what we really did, and what the Vietnam vet really was. So I'm thanking you guys back. It's great that you're putting this on, really great.

Sanderson: We appreciate it, we appreciate everything that you guys have been doing to help us put this on 'cause without you guys, I mean, you guys have bent over backwards to make sure that this is good to go, and I can speak for all the staff. We just hope that we are doing you guys, justice. Like I said, it's one of those... looking at these photographs. And the time that I've... well, we've all spent, doing both research on the unit itself, and research on each individual person, but also to really look at what you guys do. Like I said, I we just hope that we have done you justice.

Lafoon: From what I've seen, you've done us a real good job. I appreciate it.

Sanderson: No problem. Well, thank you very much, and thank you for sitting down and talking to us. And if no one else has said it, "Welcome home."

Lafoon: Thank you, Sir. Appreciate it.

Sanderson: No problem.